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**The Thorny Issue of Ethnic Autonomy in Croatia:
Serb Leaders and Proposals for Autonomy**

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The Thorny Issue of Ethnic Autonomy in Croatia: Serb Leaders and Proposals for Autonomy*

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The current political structure in Croatia provides the Serb minority with cultural autonomy and guaranteed political representation, and is a far cry from the demands that were voiced by Serb leaders before and during the conflict in the 1990s. This article argues that minority elite bargaining over this period constitutes an important explanatory factor in the development and functioning of these autonomy arrangements. Before, during and after the conflict, Serb elites adopted various proposals on autonomy that shaped the basis for further negotiation. By tracking the evolution and shifts in these positions, this article seeks to explain how such proposals came about, and argues that a combination of internal disagreements, changing relations with Belgrade and the interplay of actions and rhetoric within the Croatian government determined the path and ultimate shape of autonomy for the Serb community.

I. Introduction

“After demanding all, they had lost all.” is how Marcus Tanner describes the fate of the Serbs in Croatia (1997: 298) and, as David Owen puts it in his *Balkan Odyssey*, “the losers were the Croatian Serbs and their useless leader Martić” (1995: 387). But the Serbs in Croatia, or more to the point their leaders, had not always demanded ‘all’; they differed in their demands, which were not only elastic but also changed over time. Maximalist demands, for example, were pushed by a narrow but influential group of leaders, who managed to marginalize all alternative positions and alienate the Croatian government, the international community and finally also Belgrade. This article tracks the various demands of the Serbs in Croatia examining *inter alia* what they were willing and able to accept, as well as what they were actually in a position to demand. In this way, the article seeks to analyse and evaluate the factors affecting the various positions that were adopted by the Serbs: the effect of internal competition, Belgrade’s influence and the interplay with Croatian demands and actions.

Ever since the dissolution of Yugoslavia began, autonomy has been raised as a possible solution to the ‘Serb issue’ in Croatia, i.e. the question of how to reconcile the Serb minority in Croatia with the Croat majority’s desire for independence. But proposals for autonomy have ranged from very limited cultural autonomy to extensive territorial and political autonomy for vast parts of Croatia. For the most radical forces, on the other hand, autonomy within an independent Croatia state has consistently been regarded as completely unacceptable.

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Certain times are nevertheless more propitious than others for bringing about conflict regulation (Horowitz 1990: 116). Demands for autonomy, and the willingness of actors to concede to these demands, are elastic, and timing is therefore crucial.¹ Demands that may start out as limited demands for cultural autonomy can quickly radicalize to demands for extensive territorial autonomy or even independent statehood. For autonomy to prove a successful conflict regulating strategy, therefore, not only the majority's willingness to accept such arrangements is essential but minority representatives must also be willing and able to accept them.

Not only the 'generosity' of the majority group is decisive for the success of autonomy; leaders in the minority group may also be affected by incentives emanating from the minority group itself, and especially the possibility of outflanking can act as a constraint. Monolithic representation is not the norm in situations of ethnic conflict: elites will usually face intra-ethnic competition, which can significantly reduce their leeway in compromise. Donald Horowitz therefore argues that "a principal limitation on inter-ethnic co-operation is the configuration of intra-ethnic competition" (1985: 574). Similarly, Chaim Kaufmann argues that under conditions of hyper-nationalist mobilization, and especially following the outbreak of violence, group leaders are unlikely to be receptive to compromise and, even if they are, they cannot act without being discredited and replaced by more hard-line rivals (1996: 137, 156). The relations with the opposing ethnic group is naturally of great importance and autonomy can most easily be established before relations deteriorate considerably (Lapidoth 1996: 201), but intra-ethnic elite competition should also be considered. In addition, the possible involvement of the kin-state can significantly affect if not dictate the positions of the minority leaders. All these factors should therefore be borne in mind when analysing the developments in autonomy demands made by minority leaders, as well as the possible shifts between demands for different degrees and forms of autonomy.

II. Serb Demands and Croatian Independence

In the former Yugoslavia, Croatian independence had been a taboo topic, closely associated with the existence of the pro-Nazi Independent State of Croatia during World War II. Even years after Serb nationalism had taken hold in Serbia, Croatian nationalism remained muted (Silber and Little

¹ In this article, autonomy is viewed as a form of self-government that can take either a 'personal' or 'territorial' form. Its extent and content can vary within these categories, but 'personal' autonomy will often be associated with cultural autonomy, since extensive political autonomy is difficult to organize on a non-territorial basis. Autonomy differs from federalization in that the whole state is not necessarily organized in self-governing units and a special structure of the central state is furthermore not entailed.

1996: 82-3). But in 1989, this was to change when the Croatian Democratic Community (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica, HDZ) was established by Franjo Tuđman. At the first congress of the HDZ, Tuđman stated that the Independent State of Croatia had not only been a “fascist crime, but also an expression of the historic aspirations of the Croatian people for an independent state.”² Consequently, the election platform of the HDZ promised to strive for Croatian self-determination and sovereignty (Zakošek 1997: 39). At this point, the explicit demand was, nevertheless, not for the creation of an independent Croatian state; instead Croatian sovereignty was to be realized within a ‘reformed’ Yugoslavia. There were, however, two crucial obstacles to this plan: the government in Belgrade and the Serb minority in Croatia. As the Serb minority, according to the 1991 census, constituted 12 per cent of the population, without their acquiescence, Tuđman’s course towards independence stood no chance of being peaceful.

a) The Pre-War Period: Marginalizing the Moderates

The Serb counterpart to the HDZ, the Serb Democratic Party (Srpska Demokratska Stranka, SDS) was formed in Knin in February 1990. In the first multiparty elections in spring 1990, the big winner was however the HDZ, which secured 42 per cent of the vote, with 55 out of 80 seats,³ while the SDS polled poorly and only got electoral mandates in the Knin area.⁴ SDS’s poor showing partly reflected the lack of political organization in other parts of Croatia, but also the fact that domestic opinion was still moderate as most of Croatia’s Serbs chose to vote for the reformed communists in the Party for Democratic Change (Stranka Demokratskih Promjena, SDP).

Initial demands for ‘cultural’ autonomy

At the time, the SDS also took a fairly moderate position. The party advocated cultural autonomy for the Serbs and although the party became crucial in the ethnification of politics in Croatia, even the term ‘Serb’ in the party’s title had been contested by the party founders (Silber and Little 1996: 95). The SDS was also poorly organized. It was more a political movement than a structured political party⁵ in which many different views could be found. In the first half of 1990, the moderate

² Quoted in *Večernji List*, 25 February 1990, p. 5.

³ 55 out of 80 seats in the Socio-Political Chamber of the Parliament and 205 out of 356 seats in all three chambers.

⁴ The party garnered its main support in a chain of 13 communes in Krajina. Serbs constituted an absolute majority in 11 out of these and a relative majority in the remaining two. However, the Serbs in these communes made up only 26 per cent of the total Serb population in Croatia (Cohen 1995: 128).

⁵ Interview Veljko Džakula, Zagreb, 12 August 2003

wing of the party was still dominant, but the lack of party cohesion and a clear organizational structure was soon to cause problems for its leader, Jovan Rašković.

Following the elections, Tuđman and Rašković started negotiating possible solutions to the looming conflict. They agreed that the Serbs would receive a form of cultural autonomy for which Rašković was to present a proposal (Hislope 1998: 73). However, radical positions on both sides began to gain in strength and cultural autonomy gradually lost its potential as a solution. In their election campaign, the HDZ had targeted the overrepresentation of Serbs in official positions, and, following the election victory many Serbs were indeed fired from their jobs or forced to sign loyalty oaths (Silber and Little 1996: 108). In late June 1990, Tuđman's government went on to propose a package of constitutional amendments, which were quickly adopted on 25 July. According to these amendments, Croatia would henceforth become "the national state of the Croatian people and a state of members of other nations and minorities who are its citizens". The Serbs thereby lost their status as a constituent people. This was a significant blow to Rašković since this had been a key demand for the SDS, which rejected the status of minority and insisted on being regarded as a constituent nation. For the Croatian government giving constituent status to the Serbs in Croatia was, however, unacceptable.⁶ In a further drive towards nationalism, the draft proposed that the five-pointed star on the flag be replaced by the Šahovnica symbol, which the Serbs associated with the fascist Ustaša-state and its nationalist atrocities of World War II, and Croatian was to become the sole official language, with the requirement of a two-thirds majority in decisions on interethnic issues being removed (Hislope 1998: 73). At the same time, the government in Belgrade became increasingly vociferous in its propaganda against Croatia and the Croatian government. The dual radicalization in Zagreb and Belgrade made the SDS stronger, but it also weakened its moderate wing. Thus, the more moderate forces in the SDS that supported the demand for cultural autonomy came under increasing pressure: their position was undermined by the policies of the Croatian government and the propaganda emanating from Belgrade, and they faced outbidding within their own party.

The gradual shift to 'territorial' demands

Due to the poor showing of the SDS in the elections, the large majority of Serb representatives in the Croatian parliament were from non-ethnic parties, especially from the reformed communists in

⁶ Interview with Slaven Letica, Tuđman's principal advisor in 1990-91, Zagreb, 18 September 2003.

the SDP.⁷ But as the conflict intensified, the SDP soon lost its electoral base to the SDS (Denitch 1994: 45. Glenny 1996: 42). Growing institutionalization had also made the SDS stronger, particularly in Knin and other parts of Croatia with a significant Serb population. But in this process, the hard-liners of the party gained in strength and Rašković faced increasing challenges from Milan Babić, the mayor of Knin. Babić used his institutional position to build his own power-base in support of his more radical goals, and, as his influence increased, these demands gradually turned to *territorial* autonomy. Rašković on the other hand maintained his demand for constituent status and cultural autonomy for the Serbs, and stated that he was against political autonomy (Rašković 1990: 250-1). This demand for cultural autonomy was, however, crucially conditioned on the continued existence of the Yugoslav Federation, and was furthermore rather vague on how such autonomy should actually be organized. Babić in contrast made no secret of his demands for more extensive autonomy. Territorial autonomy was given its first form when the Community of (Serb) Municipalities of Northern Dalmatia and Lika was founded in late April 1990. Rašković denied that this Community was an expression of territorial autonomy, but argued that it could form the basis of cultural autonomy (Rašković 1990: 311). Babić was, however, to use it to create an alternative basis of power and he extended it by persuading or even forcing other municipalities to join (Silber and Little 1996: 97).

On the day the constitutional amendments were passed by the Croatian parliament, the so-called 'Serb Assembly' was held in Srb in Krajina. The Assembly constituted 'the Serb parliament' and elected Babić as its president. The gradual shift in demands was reflected in the *Declaration on Sovereignty and Autonomy of the Serb People* which was adopted by the Assembly in Srb. The declaration stated that the "Serbian people in Croatia have the right to autonomy. The content of that autonomy will depend on either federal or confederal order in Yugoslavia." The degree of autonomy was therefore linked to the future status of Yugoslavia: "In the conditions of confederal state order of Yugoslavia, the Serbian people in Croatia has the right to full political-territorial autonomy" (Dakić 1994: Enclosure no.5). With this declaration, the move had subsequently been made from cultural to political and territorial autonomy. In his book on the matter, *Luda Zemlja*, Rašković stated that territorial autonomy would also have been declared if Yugoslavia ceased to exist (1990: 251). This may be so, but the declaration also stated that the future of Yugoslavia could not be determined without the participation of the Serb people, and Rašković the following day declared that, "In the event that Croatia secedes, the Serbs in Croatia have a right to decide in a

⁷ The five SDS representatives walked out of the Parliament soon after its constitution.

referendum with whom and on whose territory they will live” (Woodward 1995: 120). At this stage, therefore, it was still unclear what would ultimately be demanded in case Yugoslavia dissolved.

In a further move, the Assembly also decided to hold a referendum on the declaration of autonomy. This was, however, declared illegal by the Zagreb government, and the Community of Municipalities was banned. Although Tuđman stated that, “territorial autonomy for the Serbs is out of the question. We will not allow it” (Cohen 1995: 133), the referendum, nevertheless, went ahead on 19 August with close to 100 per cent of the Serb voters supporting the proposal for autonomy. On 30 September, autonomy was then declared. The pressure on Rašković and the increasing power of the hard-line faction had led to a radicalization of demands: from cultural autonomy to territorial autonomy, and an accompanied vagueness of demands in case of full Croatian independence.

The emergence of hard-liners: building a power-base for more radical demands

Despite increased polarization, negotiations between the Croatian government and the SDS still took place, although the hard-line faction of the party was bitterly opposed to continued talks. In August 1990, a hard-line faction in the SDS had unsuccessfully tried to replace Rašković as party president, thereby attempting to change the course of the party (ICTY 2002: 13563). But the hard-line faction was slowly growing in strength, and the leaders of the SDS who took part in negotiations, subsequently experienced intimidation, being described as traitors.⁸ Rašković still had his popular appeal to lean on, but behind the scenes, Babić was strengthening his basis for power. Babić was aware that Rašković had more popular support, so avoided direct confrontations.⁹ Instead, he sought to build his power-base in Knin, while Rašković spent his time in Zagreb and Belgrade.

In December 1990, the Croatian parliament had enacted a new constitution, which mentioned cultural autonomy: “Members of all nations and minorities are guaranteed freedom to express their national identity, freedom to use their language and script and cultural autonomy.” (art. 15). But at the same time, the Serbs were denied their status as constituent peoples. The day before the constitution was enacted, the Community of Municipalities proclaimed a Serb Autonomous Region (SAO) of Krajina, with the statute declaring territorial autonomy in Croatia (ICTY 2002: 12940; Dakić 1994: 52). Nevertheless, territorial autonomy was not enough for Babić whose power-base was now growing strong enough to force direct confrontation with Rašković. By taking advantage of greater extremism and his greater personal support in the Knin region, Babić had been able to

⁸ Interview Vojislav Vukčević, Belgrade, 7 August 2003

⁹ Interview Vojislav Vukčević, Belgrade, 7 August 2003

strengthen his power, with Rašković's frequent absences from the region enabling him to consolidate this power behind the scenes.

The hard-line rejection of autonomy

In February 1991, Babić finally confronted Rašković at a meeting of the SDS Main Board, but to his dismay 38 of 42 members supported Rašković (Gagnon 1994/5: n87). Vukčević argues that at this point Babić was "politically dead". In the circumstances, a new statute for the SDS was also adopted in which the stated goal of the party was the continued co-existence of Serbs and Croats in Yugoslavia, rather than annexation of Serb-majority areas to Serbia.¹⁰ It was shortly after this meeting that Babić set up his own party: the SDS of Krajina. While his strategy had changed, Babić was nevertheless not defeated and had an ace up his sleeve: Slobodan Milošević. The Belgrade government was becoming increasingly frustrated with Rašković, and Babić argues that it was Milošević who told him to replace Rašković (ICTY, 2002: 13107). Milošević had good reasons to not like Rašković, for he had not only showed willingness to negotiate, but had also opposed Milošević in public and had described him as "a great Bolshevik" and a "tyrant" (Rašković 1990: 328). Furthermore, Rašković had decided to let the SDS branch in Serbia run against Milošević's Socialist Party in the Serbian elections in late 1990, although this had been rejected by the main party (Schwarm 1995a). This move further weakened Rašković's status in the SDS and made him even more undesirable in the eyes of Milošević. As Babić needed support in his struggle against the more moderate wing of the SDS, he was willing to follow Belgrade's lead, and was furthermore helped by being less anti-Communist than Rašković. Consequently, the Belgrade media began to repeatedly attack Rašković and other SDS-leaders willing to negotiate, while Belgrade became more involved in the arming of the militant wing in Knin (see e.g. Judah, 2000: 170-6).

Despite the apparent victory of the moderate wing of the SDS in February, polarization was therefore increasing. In this atmosphere, most focus was obviously placed on the Serb politicians in the SDS, but there were several Serb representatives from other parties who were still in parliament and who were also trying to find a solution. Simo Rajić, for example, a Serb deputy from the SDP, had become deputy speaker of parliament in September 1990. Rašković, however, argued that Rajić was not a 'good Serb' and that he could consequently not speak for the Serb nation (Rašković 1990:

¹⁰ Interview Vojislav Vukčević, Belgrade, 7 August 2003.

331). After only four months in the post, Rajić therefore resigned citing “the impossibility to promote Serb-Croat relations in Croatia” (Maloča 1991).¹¹

Meanwhile, three proposals for cultural autonomy were submitted to the parliament’s special commission on interethnic relations. The most comprehensive proposal suggesting ‘maximalist’ cultural autonomy as well as the creation of a Club of Serb Deputies in Parliament. The publication of these proposals coincided with talks between leaders of the SDS from Slavonia and the Croatian government. In these talks, the SDS leaders expressed their willingness to compromise, indicated that the SDS deputies might return to parliament and also proposed the creation of a Club of Serb Deputies (Krušelj 1991). It therefore seemed that a rapprochement between SDS and non-SDS Serb deputies was possibly, and this could potentially strengthen the moderate faction of the SDS. However, on Radio Belgrade one of the SDS negotiators, Vukčević was accused of protecting Croatian interests and was openly accused of not being in a position to represent the interests of the Serb people.¹² Five days later, on 18 March 1991, the Municipal Assembly of Knin consequently adopted the decision to separate SAO Krajina from Croatia. Shortly afterwards, Babić was appointed President of SAO Krajina and Rašković was declared *persona non grata* in Knin.

In July 1991, when violence had already started in parts of Slavonia, forces outside Knin made a final attempt to reclaim the initiative from the hard-liners. The Serb Democratic Forum (Srpski Demokratski Forum, SDF) was founded with the aim of finding a peaceful solution through influencing the Serb community and the Serbs in Croatia.¹³ The SDF supported the independence of Croatia within its existing border (Promitzer 1992: 45) and argued for extensive autonomy as a solution to the conflict.¹⁴ Among the founders of the SDF were Rašković and other members of the SDS, but their position in the party was weakening and they were not now in a position to stop the situation spiralling into violence. On 31 July, Tuđman made a last offer of local self-government to the Knin region, but this was rejected by SAO Krajina (Woodward 1995: 182).

In the pre-war period, then, what started out as demands for cultural autonomy gradually radicalized over time, and, as war broke out, no solutions within the boundaries of a Croatian state were acceptable to the dominant forces of Serbs in Croatia. This radicalization was brought about by a process of outbidding within the party that came to be accepted as the legitimate representative

¹¹ Quote from “Documents: Chronology 1991, January through March” *Croatian International Relations Review* 1996, 2(2) p. 23.

¹² Interview Vojislav Vukčević, Belgrade, 7 August 2003

¹³ Interview Milorad Pupovac, Zagreb, 11 August 2003

¹⁴ In 1992, President of the SDF, Milorad Pupovac, wrote that “the Serb minority must be allowed to develop its own territorial, political and cultural autonomy”. Pupovac, 1992: 46

of Serbs in Croatia. The victory of the radical wing of the SDS seems not to have been based on greater popular support or even greater support within the party, but rather on the building of an alternative power structure which took advantage of the geographical differences within the party. In addition, support from Belgrade was crucial in this development and the actions of the Croatian government likewise played into the hands of the extremists. The Croatian government, perhaps inadvertently, assisted Babić when its attempts to weaken Rašković strengthened his closest rival – in the summer of 1990, a transcript from negotiations with Tuđman was leaked in which Rašković confessed that he had problems controlling the more radical forces, and he described the Serbs as a ‘crazy’ people (Rašković 1990: 306, 309). As a consequence, the radical faction could use this for supporting their claim that Rašković did not represent the interest of the Serbs in Croatia, and that he was in fact playing a double game.¹⁵

It was the vagueness and ambiguity of Rašković’s position that made him particularly vulnerable to outbidding. While demands were moderate and the need for peaceful means was stressed, the rhetoric was nevertheless often inflammatory (Silber and Little 1996: 95). Rašković himself later confessed how he had radicalized Serb opinion: “I feel responsible because I prepared for this even if not in terms of military preparations. My party and I lit the fuse of Serbian nationalism” (Kurspahić 2003: 52). Cultural autonomy in Rašković’s demands had no territorial dimension, but as the conflict intensified and Rašković came under pressure from forces within the party as well as Belgrade, territorial autonomy entered onto the agenda as a demand in case the federal structure of Yugoslavia was altered. In December 1990, Vukčević and Rašković proposed changes to the draft constitution that would affirm Croatia as part of a federal Yugoslavia and include provisions for cultural autonomy. However, it was also suggested that the constitution should provide the possibility for territorial autonomy in Serb-majority areas (Vukčević 1990a; 1990b). In addition, Babić now claims that Rašković had advocated the unification of Croatian and Bosnian Krajina as Serb-majority areas at rallies in the autumn of 1990 (ICTY, 2002: 13820). The demand for autonomy was therefore marked by considerable ambiguity, especially where it came to the territorial dimension. Babić was able to take advantage of this; he could impose a territorial dimension thereby creating an alternative power-base in Knin, and was additionally helped by the ambiguity of Rašković’s demands which made it difficult for him to counter these moves.

The extremists may not have needed the extra ammunition from the Croatian government’s lost “moments of generosity” (Hislope 1998), they were already in a good position to outbid Rašković

¹⁵ Interview Drago Hedl, journalist, Osijek, 11 September 2003.

and prevent agreements from being made through force of threats, blockades, etc. While the internal competition was undoubtedly motivated by personal ambitions, the disagreement nevertheless also reflected more fundamental differences on the future of the Serbs in Croatia: should they seek to prevent the dissolution of Yugoslavia and accept autonomy in Croatia as a second-best option, or was any future in an independent Croatia merely unacceptable and annexation to Serbia the primary goal? Furthermore, Rašković and Babić differed in their degree of anti-Communism, which may have made Babić more acceptable to Milošević. Although Babić's initial success owed much to the support from Belgrade, he was henceforth to emerge as an important independent player (Glenny 1996: 18).

b) During the War: Autonomy Rejected – Until It Was Too Late

After war broke out, it was nevertheless Milošević who negotiated on behalf of the Serbs in Croatia. But this was not always to the liking of Knin, and Milošević soon discovered that Babić was not as easy to control as he had expected.

'Extensive autonomy' – rejected by both Belgrade and Knin

The last attempt to prevent the dissolution of Yugoslavia was made with the introduction of the Carrington Plan in October 1991. This plan aimed to create a loose association of sovereign or independent republics. It guaranteed extensive territorial and political autonomy to Serbs outside Serbia. In areas where Serbs were in a majority, they were entitled to use national emblems and flags of their choice, had the right to a second nationality and a separate education system, and were granted the right to their own parliament and own administrative structures (Silber and Little 1996: 192-3). Milošević alone openly rejected the plan. Susan Woodward, however, argues that the special status regions were also unacceptable to the Croatian government (1995: 182). While Milošević had been willing to accept earlier versions of the plan, the Krajina leadership refused it all along (Woodward 1995: 182. ICTY 2002: 14074). On 19 December 1991, the parliament of SAO Krajina consequently proclaimed the Republic of Serb Krajina (Republika Srpska Krajina, RSK), which was later joined by SAO of Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srem and SAO of Western Slavonia.¹⁶

¹⁶ The RSK and its institutions were never recognised by any state.

In its declaration of independence, the Croatian state had guaranteed the Serbs in Croatia respect for all human and civil rights. In addition, a *Charter on the Rights of Serbs* and other nationalities was adopted (Vukas 1999: 44). To satisfy the requirements for international recognition, the Croatian parliament on 4 December 1991 passed the *Constitutional Law on Human Rights and Freedoms* (Grdešić 1997: 120), but after recommendations from the Badinter Commission, this law was amended in May 1992 and autonomous status was granted to the regions of Knin and Glina (Vukas 1999: 44; Trifunovska 1999a: 28). The autonomy granted was more limited than the 'special status' in the Carrington Plan, but the Croatian government had nevertheless accepted some form of territorial autonomy for Krajina. However, the conflict was no longer restricted to these two regions and the ever more radicalized leaders of RSK now demanded far more than territorial autonomy in an independent Croatian state. Autonomy continued to be rejected as long as the Serb leaders still believed in a military victory, but the timing of the change in this belief varied between different leaders, and this in turn became a source of division.

Reaching a ceasefire agreement: conflict between Belgrade and Knin

The next international plan on the table was more to the liking of Milošević. The Vance Plan sought to set up four United Nations Protected Areas that coincided roughly with the Serb-held areas that had housed a Serb majority or substantial minority before the war. The remaining Serb-held areas, the so-called 'pink-zones' were earmarked for eventual return to the control of Croatian authorities (Tanner 1997: 279). Furthermore, in return for the deployment of UN forces, the Yugoslav People's Army (Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija, JNA) would withdraw from Croatia and the paramilitaries would be disarmed. Although the plan also contained provisions for the return of refugees, it was in essence a ceasefire agreement that froze the existing front lines. Milošević did not, however, count on Babić's vehement opposition to the plan, and his refusal to accept the disarmament and withdrawal of the JNA, fearing that the mandate of the UN forces would not be extended after six months (ICTY, 2002: 13625). Attempts at persuasion and intimidation failed and Belgrade instead took advantage of the internal divisions in the RSK. The president of the RSK parliament, Mile Paspalj, agreed to endorse the plan and called a parliamentary session in the town of Glina, i.e. away from Babić's stronghold in Knin. Members of the parliament from outside the Knin area proved more willing to follow Milošević's lead: they endorsed the plan, dismissed Babić as president and requested the resignation of the government. Babić had, however, not given up his fight and convened another faction of the parliament to a session in Knin. This faction decided to

call a referendum on the Vance Plan and voted against the dismissal of Babić, thus thereby effectively establishing dual rule in the RSK.

In late February 1992, Goran Hadžić, who was president of the SAO Slavonia, was elected the new president of the RSK. After a period of competition between centres of power, the authority of his government was eventually established (Dakić 1994: 59) and Babić temporarily left the political scene until the time was ripe for his comeback. As Hadžić recalls, Babić was “completely powerless”, since Milan Martić, who had chosen to follow Belgrade’s lead, controlled the police and the military.¹⁷

Infighting and intransigence in Krajina

The new government with Zdravko Zečević as prime minister appeared to be more moderate, but it soon became clear that the Vance Plan was only intended to freeze the situation. The other provisions of the plan were never implemented. In the autumn of 1992, the RSK parliament and the Republika Srpska parliament in Bosnia adopted a *Declaration on Unity*, thereby signalling its clear refusal to be part of Croatia. In September 1992, Hadžić reportedly told the UN Secretary General that he was not prepared for talks on any form of Serb autonomy within Croatia (Vukas 1999: 56). Frustrated with the lack of progress on implementation of the Vance Plan, members of the RSK government, Veljko Džakula and Dušan Ećimović initiated negotiations with the Croatian government on the return of refugees to Western Slavonia, and, together with other SDS leaders from Western Slavonia, they signed the so-called ‘Daruvar Agreement’ in February 1993. This, however, was considered to create an unwanted precedent for other parts of the RSK – if in Western Slavonia, why not in Knin? – and so, in September 1993, the perpetrators were arrested and charged with treason (Schwarm 1994b; Komlenović 1995).¹⁸ The arrests sent a clear signal to anyone who might have been contemplating negotiations and compromise, and also made sure that they would not be able to contest the upcoming elections.¹⁹

The elections were meant to resolve the chaotic political situation in the Serb statelet. Late 1993 was characterized by increasing internal divisions between the RSK president Hadžić and interior minister and military leader Milan Martić. Hadžić had unsuccessfully tried to gain control of Martić’s paramilitary forces, while Martić fought back by accusing Hadžić of controlling the oil

¹⁷ Interview Goran Hadžić, Belgrade, 30 October 2003.

¹⁸ Interview Veljko Džakula, Zagreb, 12 August 2003

¹⁹ Interview Dušan Ećimović, Belgrade, 29 August 2003

resources in the RSK.²⁰ The holding of elections, however, also gave Babić a chance to make a comeback, and his party, SDS of Krajina, ultimately beat Hadžić's SDS of Serb Lands despite Belgrade's support for Hadžić (Schwarm 1993). In the presidential elections, the run-off was between Babić and Martić. Babić seems to have won already in the first round, but the election commission nevertheless called for a second round,²¹ which Martić narrowly won after having received substantial support from Belgrade and its media (Schwarm 1994a). Despite his humble origins as a police inspector in Knin, Martić had risen to the top of the RSK leadership as a military leader in Krajina without any party affiliation to the SDS, or any other party for that matter. The result of the elections did, however, indicate that Belgrade's influence in Knin was gradually waning and Martić was also to turn against his former sponsor. Thus in the atmosphere of infighting and intransigence, any moderation was forcefully suppressed, while at the same time Belgrade appeared to be gradually losing its control.

The Z-4 Plan: putting autonomy back on the table

In December 1994, the Croatian government and the RSK leaders signed an *Agreement on Economic Cooperation*, which aimed to restore water, electricity and oil supply as well as reopen the highway between Zagreb and Belgrade. The agreement was, however, silent on the future status of the Serb-held territories in Croatia. Earlier, in October, Tuđman had instead stated that, "The Framework for the solution of the problem of occupied areas in Croatia is provided in the Constitution and the Constitutional Law on the Rights of Minorities. Any federation, let alone confederation, is out of [the] question. Solutions can be sought only within the autonomy of counties which had predominant Serb population according to the 1991 census and nothing more than that" (Marković 2002a). In other words, what was offered was the limited territorial autonomy of Glina and Knin that had been assured in the 1991 Constitutional Law. At the same time, Croatian authorities started expressing their readiness to accept internationally guaranteed Serb autonomy (Lovrić 1994). Consequently, in early 1995, the so-called Z-4 Plan was drawn up by the 'Mini-Contact Group': US, Russia, EU and UN representatives from the Peace Conference on the Former Yugoslavia. The plan promised far-reaching autonomy for areas with a Serb majority, according to the 1991 census, including separate currency, its own parliament, police force, fiscal policy as well as links with Serbia. Eastern Slavonia was not covered by this extensive autonomy arrangement, but international forces would be deployed in the region for a period of five years.

²⁰ "Chronology 1993, October through December" *Croatian International Relations Review* 2000, 6(18/19) p. 54.

²¹ Interview Mile Dakić. Belgrade, 29 August 2003.

The Croatian government agreed to the plan as a starting point, but found the level of autonomy too extensive. As the Croatian prime minister, Nikica Valentić put it, “it actually leads to the dissolution of Croatia” (Marković 2002b). One can, however, question if the Croatian government at this point was ready to accept autonomy for the Serbs or was confident that it could win a military victory. In early 1995, for example, the Independent Serb Party (Samostalna Srpska Stranka, SSS) applied for registration with the Ministry of Public Administration, and the president of the party, Milorad Pupovac, asserts that it was demanded that all passages that described a possible basis for autonomy for the Serbs in Croatia were deleted from the party programme.²² Milošević professed his support for the plan, while the Krajina leaders were split on the issue. RSK prime minister, Borislav Mikelić advocated acceptance, but Martić rejected it and in this he was supported by Babić (Tanner 1997: 295). Furthermore, Martić stated that he was unwilling to negotiate as long as the Croatian government intended to terminate UNPROFOR’s mandate. Lack of trust in the intentions of the Croatian government may therefore have been one factor adding to the failure of the plan. However, more importantly, the dominant forces in the RSK still believed in a future outside Croatia and were therefore unwilling to accept even extensive autonomy for part of the territory. The internal dispute thus prevented a more realistic assessment of the strength of the RSK. The statelet was consequently paralysed and the hard-liners were growing in strength, supported by the Bosnian Serbs (Judah 2000: 298).

The break with Belgrade over a settlement

While Krajina was caught up in infighting, the situation in the region was changing and the military position of the RSK was weakening. Milošević had caught on to this and started urging a settlement, but this was refused by the intransigent Krajina leadership which was moving further and further away from Belgrade. In May 1995, the miscalculations of the RSK leaders became obvious and, in operation Flash, Croatian forces unexpectedly retook Western Slavonia. Losing Western Slavonia caused turmoil in the Krajina leadership: the army chief was consequently fired and Martić only managed to retain his post as president with the help of Babić (Owen, 1995: 344). Together they decided to undermine the support of RSK prime minister Borislav Mikelić, who was known for his close links to Milošević. Mikelić was relieved of his post by the RSK parliament and Milošević thereby lost his loyal supporter. In June, the RSK parliament unanimously adopted a decision on union with the Bosnian Serbs even though this was opposed by Belgrade. This decision

²² Interview Milorad Pupovac, Zagreb, 11 August 2003.

also caused a rift between Knin and Eastern Slavonia where Hadžić formed the Coordinating Committee for Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srem, which was akin to an autonomous region and an expression of support for Belgrade's line (Cicić 1995. Janjić 1995). Infighting furthered the intransigence of the Knin leadership and moderation was impossible despite Milošević's support for a settlement.

Only in the eleventh hour did the RSK leadership become willing to negotiate, and by then it was too late. On 3 August 1995, the Croatian representatives demanded that the Serbs accept Croatian rule immediately, well knowing that their offensive would be launched the following day (Silber and Little 1996: 356). The next day, 'Operation Storm' was launched. The RSK Army quickly collapsed and no assistance was forthcoming from either Pale or Belgrade. Tens of thousands of Serbs were forced to flee in the biggest forcible displacement of people in Europe since the Second World War (Ibid. 358). To date, it is estimated that as many as 300,000 to 350,000 Serbs left Croatia during the war. Of these, the Croatian government had registered 96,500 returns by November 2002, but this figure overrates the actual number since many again depart for Bosnia or Serbia and Montenegro only after a short stay (Human Rights Watch 2003: 3).

Internal divisions and personal rivalry played an important role in the position of the Krajina Serbs during the war. It fuelled their intransigence and resulted in deadlock when important decisions were needed. Changing alliances based on power ambitions also reinforced radicalism in the Krajina leadership. In addition, the internal divisions primarily reflected different views on the best strategy for the RSK. These focused on the questions of how great the strength of the RSK actually was and whether support from Belgrade could be counted on. The central question was, however, whether extensive autonomy should be accepted in Croatia. This partly reflected the state of relations with Belgrade, but also the power-base of the leaders. There were significant differences between leaders from Knin, Western Slavonia and Eastern Slavonia. The Belgrade government thus played a crucial role, but with varying influence over the four years. From being mere puppets of the Belgrade regime – albeit puppets with an important symbolic impact in Serbia – the Krajina leadership came out in defiance of Milošević and his change to a more accommodative position. The unwillingness of the Krajina leaders to accept anything short of joining Serbia therefore proved to be their fateful downfall.

The more moderate voices that did exist in the RSK were marginalized with sometimes brutal means, and only when it was too late did the dominant forces in Knin agree to some form of autonomy arrangement. Representatives of the 'Urban Serbs' lacked influence in the RSK.

Pupovac, who was the president of the Serb Democratic Forum, had contacts with some of the more moderate forces, while the leader of Serb National Party (Srpska Narodna Stranka) and Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Milan Đukić was not accepted.²³ With the Serb deputies belonging to other, Croatian, parties there were even fewer contacts. In one remote area of Croatia, Gorski Kotar, a moderate faction of SDS managed to stay in power and reached an agreement with Zagreb whereby peace was upheld in this region. Isolation seems to have been crucial for the ability of these local leaders to take a course that differed from the radical positions within the RSK.²⁴ When these more moderate forces outside of the RSK are added to the divisions within the statelet, the degree of disunity among the Serbs in Croatia becomes even more striking.

Autonomy in Eastern Slavonia

The only area remaining area under Serb control after August 1995 was Eastern Slavonia, and the leadership here needed less encouragement to negotiate. The president of SAO Slavonia, Goran Hadžić, had throughout the whole period been closely in tune with Belgrade. Furthermore, the Eastern Slavonian leaders had learned their lesson from what had happened in Krajina, and were given further incentives to compromise by the Croatian government's repeated threats that it would take the area by force. They therefore concluded that unless an agreement was reached, they would face the same fate as the Serbs in Krajina.²⁵ However, on 28 October the local Serbs rejected a draft agreement which one of the negotiators, Milan Milanović, described as a "speedy, complete and almost unconditional reintegration into Croatia". Another negotiator, Slavko Dokmanović also said, "If that agreement were possible, we would have signed it in 1990 and there would have been no war" (Schwarm 1995b). Meanwhile, Milošević and Tudman reached a consensus in Dayton, and on 12 November, the so-called 'Erdut Agreement' was signed in Eastern Slavonia. Hadžić argues that he refused to sign it and that the agreement was therefore only signed by Milanović.²⁶ The agreement guarantees the Serbs "the highest level of internationally recognised human rights and fundamental freedoms," and the Serb community was furthermore given the right to "appoint a joint Council of Municipalities." Otherwise the agreement is silent on the political structure which would exist after reintegration into Croatia. What appeared to have been decisive in Eastern Slavonia was therefore not the content of the agreement, but the disadvantageous military situation of the Serbs

²³ Interview Milorad Pupovac, Zagreb, 11 August 2003. Interview Milan Đukić, Zagreb, 30 July 2003.

²⁴ The chief negotiator of the Croatian Government, Slavko Degoricija, argues that isolation rather than more moderate attitudes among the people in this area was decisive. Interview Slavko Degoricija, Zagreb, 10 December 2003.

²⁵ Interview Vojislav Stanimirović, Vukovar, 25 September 2003.

²⁶ Interview Goran Hadžić, Belgrade, 30 October 2003.

and pressure from the Belgrade government, which had consistently held larger sway in this part of the RSK.

c) The Post-War Period: Reintegration of Eastern Slavonia and Limited Demands for Autonomy

In the other parts of Croatia, the remaining Serbs were now a small and dispersed community unlikely to make excessive demands. After the military victory, the Croatian government nevertheless began undercutting the autonomy and political representation afforded to the Serbs in the 1991 Constitutional Law – the provisions for special status districts and proportional representation were suspended until the next census (Trifunovska 1999b: 474-5). In addition, human rights violations were a recurring problem throughout this period, especially in the former Serb-controlled areas (Isaković 2000: 53. Trifunovska 1999b: 477-9). The situation in Croatia was met with international criticism and, in July 1997, the World Bank decided to postpone indefinitely a \$30 million loan. The International Monetary Fund also postponed discussions on the release of part of a \$486 million credit (Trifunovska 1999b: 479). At the same time, the end of the transitional authority in Eastern Slavonia was nearing and it was still unknown how hard-liners in the region would react to the prospect of Croatian authority being re-established, especially since the issue of autonomy had not yet been settled.

Cultural autonomy as a basis for reintegration

As a response to this situation, the Croatian government in January 1997 submitted a *Letter of Intent* to the UN, which together with the Erdut Agreement was to form the basis of the reintegration of Eastern Slavonia. The document promised cultural autonomy as well as proportionality in local representation and administration. In addition, following the next census, proportionality in the Lower House of Parliament was promised, while two Serb representatives would be appointed to the Upper House. Serb representatives would also be appointed to senior posts in government ministries. Nevertheless, what was missing from this document was any form of territorial autonomy: instead Eastern Slavonia would be divided between two counties, Osijek-Baranja and Vukovar-Srijem. Vojislav Stanimirović, who was president of the Regional Executive Council, argued that this division would make Serbs a minority in the area and that a single unit would offer more protection. He stressed, however, that they were not demanding political

autonomy, “that is in the past, a finished matter” (Hedl 1997b: 18). The *Letter of Intent* permitted municipalities with a Serb majority to form a Joint Council of Municipalities (Zajedničko Veće Opština, ZVO), but this body was only given a consultative role. Jacques Klein, head of the transitional authority, nevertheless, received the document enthusiastically: “I think the Serbs in the Podunavlje will be very satisfied, as they are being offered more than they could ever have imagined” (Hedl 1997c). This enthusiasm did not offer the Serb leaders much hope of further concessions in case of a rejection. Acceptance was given further support by statements from the Croatian side that after the elections – scheduled for April 1997 – a firmer union of Serb municipalities could be created. Finally, Belgrade reportedly made clear to Hadžić that it supported the arrangement (Čulić 1997:7). Hadžić’s more radical faction had insisted on a referendum on the ‘political integrity’ of Eastern Slavonia, but Stanimirović managed to narrowly defeat Hadžić when remnants of the SDS reorganized. People around Stanimirović commented that Hadžić’s faction had “obviously not heard that Knin had fallen” (Hedl 1997c), but outbidding had ceased to be the order of the day in Eastern Slavonia, and the peaceful reintegration of the region proceeded. Despite the continued existence of divisions among the local leaders the moderate forces were now dominant; the Serbs were in a weak position, international pressure was considerable and Belgrade no longer provided support for the radicals.

Merger of Serb parties: demands for ‘personal’ autonomy

Prior to the reintegration of Eastern Slavonia, a form of ‘integration’ of the Serb political parties also took place when Milorad Pupovac’s SSS merged with the remnants of the SDS under the name Independent Democratic Serb Party (Samostalna Demokratska Srpska Stranka, SDSS). Eastern Slavonia was considered to be decisive for the future of Serbs in Croatia (Raseta 1997a) – it was the area where the Serbs were most numerous and the only area where the war had not resulted in a total victory for the Croatian forces. The leverage of the Serb representatives was therefore greater in this area. Milan Đukić’s Serb National Party had also been offered to join the new party, but the talks failed as Đukić refused to accept Stanimirović as party president and the establishment of headquarters in Vukovar.²⁷ With the creation of the SDSS, the main Serb political forces in Croatia had chosen a conciliatory course, and the party showed itself more willing to cooperate with the Croatian government than the SNS, which had paradoxically been created by Tuđman in 1991. The SDSS chose to support the amendments to the constitution in December 1997, which the SNS

²⁷ Interview Milorad Pupovac, Zagreb, 11 August 2003. Interview Milan Đukić, Zagreb, 30 July 2003.

vehemently opposed. The changes were largely symbolic, but Đukić strongly rejected that the Serbs would now be described as a ‘national minority’ rather than as a ‘nation’ in the preamble. He also argued that naming the Croatian parliament ‘Sabor’ would bring back memories of the fascist Independent State of Croatia (Đukić, 1997).

Pupovac and Đukić are long-time staunch rivals, and Đukić accused Pupovac of having become a “traitor of the Serb people.”²⁸ Outbidding was therefore still taking place, but the SDSS was on the rise and the position of the Serb community was so weak that ambitious demands were unrealistic. In July 1997, the Serb National Council (Srpsko Narodno Vijeće, SNV) was founded as an umbrella association of Serb associations and political representatives, but without the participation of the SNS, which rejected the initiative. Pupovac was elected President and the objective of the council was declared to be the realization of personal autonomy for the Serbs in Croatia: “The territorial forms which were first prescribed by Carrington’s convention, after that partly by the constitutional law on minority rights, and after that by plan Z4, these concepts at this moment and with the current situation ... are neither feasible nor possible. What is realistic and the optimum for the Serbs in Croatia is personal autonomy along with the mechanism of municipal councils” (Raseta 1997b). The competition that still existed among the Serb leaders in Croatia no longer had a centrifugal force: cultural autonomy was demanded by the dominant forces as the only realistic demand, given the current position of the Serbs in Croatia.

Implementation of autonomy

However, there remained great discrepancies between minority rights and autonomy on paper and in reality (see e.g. Trifunovska 1999a). In 1999, Human Rights Watch reported that “Serbs remain second class citizens in Croatia As a result of discriminatory laws, and above all discriminatory practices, Croatian Serbs do not enjoy their civil rights as Croatian citizens” (Human Rights Watch 1999: 3). After Tuđman’s death and the election of a new government in 2000, hopes were raised that the situation would improve, but in 2001, Pupovac argued that “the ignoring of national minorities has been continued during the new government.”²⁹ In December 2002, the long-awaited *Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities* (CLNM) was passed. This followed a new census in 2001 in which only 4.5 per cent of the population declared themselves Serbs.³⁰ The

²⁸ Interview Milan Đukić, Zagreb, 30 July 2003

²⁹ This was stated at an international conference on minorities held in Zagreb.

<http://www.vlada.hr/bulletin/2001/april/april/human-full.html>

³⁰ The method used for the census was heavily criticised by the Serb parties, who argued that it underestimated the number of Serbs in Croatia.

CLNM contains provisions for proportional representation on the local and national level, in the Parliament, for example, the Serbs are guaranteed three seats.³¹ Proportionality also applies to local executive bodies, state administration and judicial bodies. In combination with already existing legislation, the CLNM provides for cultural autonomy in the fields of language, education, associations, religion and the public display of symbols, as well as access to the media. As a new feature, the CLNM introduces Councils of National Minorities on municipal, city, county and national level. At the local level, these Councils can be established in self-government units if a minority group constitutes at least 15 per cent of the population,³² but they will only have a consultative role and the autonomy provided is therefore limited. The councils are also permitted to join together and establish a coordinating body (CLNM 2002), which gives some territorial dimension to the autonomy afforded to minorities: areas with significant Serb population will have an additional channel for affecting policies.

Autonomy in 2003 and 1990 compared

The current political and legal structure therefore promises the Serbs in Croatia cultural autonomy, proportional representation and a very limited form of territorial autonomy. This is similar to some of the demands made by the SDS in early 1990 before the conflict started spiralling out of control, but without the constituent status that in 1990 accompanied the demands for cultural autonomy, and it is a far cry from the demands made at other stages of the conflict. Furthermore, the position of the Serbs is much weaker now than in 1990: the Serb population in Croatia is numerically reduced and no longer receives strong support from Belgrade. Also, the hard-liners are gone and the Serb politicians remaining in Croatia have more or less consistently towed a moderate line. The current situation is therefore a direct product of the war and of the Croatian victory, but the positions taken before, during and after the war, and the competition between different factions greatly affected the situation as it looks today. Since its military victory, the Croatian government has been unwilling to concede to Serb demands for minority rights and autonomy, and international pressure has been crucial for the current political structure. The demands that the Serb parties now make reflect this: above all, they demand refugee returns and effective implementation of the legislation that is already in place.³³ The SNS occasionally still makes demands for some form of territorial

³¹ The CLNM states *maximum* three seats reserved for the Serbs, but the Election Law which was amended in April 2003 guarantees three seats.

³² In addition, in local self-government units with at least 200 members of a minority group, a council can also be established. For regional self-government units the number is 500 members.

³³ See e.g. the website of the Serb National Council, <http://www.snv.hr>

autonomy, but the party now stands alone with such demands, since, as Pupovac argues, “To demand cantonisation and territorial autonomy today simply means to put a huge burden on the fragile shoulders of the Serbian community” (RFE/RL 2000).

III. Conclusion

The ‘fragile shoulders’ of the Serb community and the limited degree of autonomy was not what Serb leaders had envisioned when they began demanding it for the Serbs in Croatia. The early demands for cultural autonomy and constituent status radicalized into demands for territorial and political autonomy and finally for secession from Croatia. But the hard-liners overplayed their hand, failed to realize that their luck was changing and ended up with much less than what they had rejected at earlier stages. The demands for autonomy were not static, but the radicalization of demands did not only reflect the *inter-ethnic* situation. Competition between the Serb leaders, ideological differences and different strategic choices were important in the changing positions of the leaders.

Furthermore, the radicalization of demands does not seem to have been based on greater support within the party or in the general Serb population in Croatia – the hard-liners managed to build an alternative power-base that took advantage of the attitudinal differences in different parts of Croatia. In addition, Rašković’s ambiguous position facilitated the radicalization of demands. Finally, support from Belgrade was, in the pre-war period, important for the ability of hard-liners to sideline more moderate options – outbidding did not only emanate from competing Serb leaders in Croatia, but also from the ‘kin-state’. The relations with Belgrade, however, changed between 1991 and 1995 and, from echoing Milošević’s policies, the RSK leaders emerged as independent political actors. In 1995, the leaders who were willing to negotiate were sidelined despite being supported by Milošević. The puppeteer had thus lost control of his puppets, and the only position leading to the top in Knin became an uncompromising one. In the radicalization of demands, the actions and rhetoric by the Croatian government also played a role. Tuđman professed his willingness to accommodate Serb demands, but the promises were not borne out and other actions contradicted this moderate stance. Furthermore, the decision to seek to weaken Rašković proved to be a dangerous strategy since more radical forces were waiting in the wings.

The Serb demands for autonomy and the changes in these demands have not only mirrored interethnic relations. The Serb leaders in Croatia were not a uniform group, and even within each party many different variations in opinion were to be found. Also, the links with Belgrade differed

between different leaders and also changed over time. In order to analyse demands for autonomy and hence the development of the conflict, one therefore needs to also look at internal dynamics, at internal competition and constraints, processes of outbidding, and changing relations with the kin-state. In the case of Croatia, these dynamics were not only important in shaping Serb demands but also in the autonomy arrangement that currently exists in the country.

Acronyms

HDZ: Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica, Croatian Democratic Community
RSK: Republika Srpska Krajina, Republic of Serb Krajina
SAO: Srpska Autonomna Oblast, Serb Autonomous Region
SDP: Socijaldemokratska Partija, Social Democratic Party (Until 1992: Stranka Demokratskih Promjena, Party for Democratic Change).
SDS: Srpska Demokratska Stranka, Serb Democratic Party
SDSS: Samostalna Demokratska Srpska Stranka, Independent Democratic Serb Party
SNS: Srpska Narodna Stranka, Serb National Party
SSS: Samostalna Srpska Stranka, Independent Serb Party

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